

Through contacts, past trips, pope has finger on pulse of U.S. church

VATICAN CITY – When Pope Benedict XVI visits the United States this spring, he will not be stepping into the unknown.

Through his many personal contacts with American church leaders and papal diplomats, his past trips to the U.S. and his ability to remember much of what he hears and reads, Pope Benedict has his finger firmly on the pulse of the church in the United States.

Bishops from around the world coming to Rome consistently have expressed awe and admiration for the pope's remarkable depth of knowledge, his familiarity with everyday events worldwide, and his recollection of minute or even obscure facts and past events.

"He has always been amazingly well-informed on the U.S.," said U.S. Jesuit Father Joseph Fessio, who studied under the future pope in the 1970s.

Father Fessio, founder and editor of Ignatius Press, said that every time he met with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger during annual meetings of the directors of Casa Balthasar – a Rome-based center that aids priestly discernment and study – he would always find him extremely aware.

During those meetings "I would generally have two or three items I wanted to bring to his attention. He almost always was already aware of what I spoke about," Father Fessio said in a recent e-mail response to questions from Catholic News Service.

In a way, the pope's long stint at the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was the perfect place to become well-versed in the situations and challenges the Catholic Church faces in the United States. The congregation has weekly meetings with experts on current prominent topics – such as advances in medicine – and it also receives regular reports from the world's bishops.

Washington Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl said a lot of those reports "would have to

do with theological issues, but, regularly, doctrine committees of conferences of bishops were asked to provide the (doctrinal) office with overviews of what was going on in that country.”

The archbishop said Pope Benedict’s attention to and recollection of details are particularly striking.

In a recent phone interview with CNS, he recalled that in January 2005 he had to visit the Vatican’s doctrinal congregation for a project on which he was working.

Cardinal Ratzinger was elected pope just a few months later, and that May Archbishop Wuerl returned to Rome and greeted the pope at the end of a Wednesday general audience.

“When I went up to greet him, he said, ‘Have you completed that project?’ I thought to myself: How would he even remember, with all the things on his desk right now as pope, this little project of mine?” the archbishop said.

Despite this ability to recall surprising amounts of minutiae, Pope Benedict does not get bogged down in the details, the Washington archbishop said.

The pope “strikes me as a person far more aware of the bigger picture,” he said.

Collaborators, both past and present, who have worked alongside the pope are also quick to point out the pope’s gigabyte memory bank.

“He has an amazing power of retention. He reads an enormous amount. Still, I don’t know how he does it,” said Father Fessio.

As head of the doctrinal congregation and as pontiff, Pope Benedict has always had Americans on his staff. For instance, U.S. Archbishop James Harvey is one of his private secretaries, and the former San Francisco archbishop, Cardinal William J. Levada, is now head of the doctrinal congregation.

People who know Pope Benedict say he is a good listener and accessible, and it made meetings with him as head of the doctrinal congregation a positive experience.

“Not only was he present, as opposed to having just someone from the office meet

(us), but he would listen, he would respond to questions, and he would seem to already have considerable knowledge of whatever the issues we brought to discuss," said Archbishop Wuerl.

He said bishops' group talks with Cardinal Ratzinger began with a prayer and with him asking participants what their issues and concerns were "rather than give a talk to us first."

"He didn't come to the meeting with an already formed vision of what was happening. He listened, and he responded across the board," the archbishop said.

The pope's ability to see things from so many points of view is also a sign of his having "a very wide vision" and sources of information that "were of considerable breadth," the Washington archbishop said.

Pope Benedict's movements and schedule are much more restricted now that he is the pontiff, but he also has access to a whole new network of information.

Staffers at the Vatican's Secretariat of State and Vatican representatives in the United States - the papal nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, in Washington and Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Vatican's observer at the United Nations in New York - act as an information clearinghouse, keeping the pope up to date on the United States.

One Vatican source said another major resource is the U.S. bishops themselves - with the information they pass directly to the pope during meetings at the Vatican and documents the bishops' conference produces. In addition to the bishops' "ad limina" visits every five years to report on the status of their dioceses, the president, vice president and general secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops also meet privately with the pope once a year.

The other way of staying in tune is the mass media and what the mail brings - "what one finds, hears and then the whole network of people who write to the Holy Father, like religious, bishops and individual faithful," the source said.

He said the Vatican receives a huge amount of correspondence addressed to the pope. General greetings are set aside and tallied up and more important mail ends

up on the pope's desk, he said.

Pope Benedict regularly thumbs through the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, which carries a variety of international news. Staffers at the Vatican's Secretariat of State comb through other news sources for a daily news roundup for the pope.

While the April visit to Washington and New York will be his first trip to the United States as pope, it will not be the first time he has set foot on American soil. As Cardinal Ratzinger, the pope has been to the U.S. at least five times.

In February 1984 he traveled to Dallas, where he gave two talks, including one to bishops of the Americas, and in January 1988 he traveled to New York City for a public lecture.

He visited Washington in January 1990 to give a talk at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family. In February 1991, he spoke at a bishops' workshop in Dallas, where he delivered an address on "Conscience and Truth."

He went to San Francisco in February 1999 for a meeting of Vatican doctrinal congregation officials and doctrinal officials from bishops' conferences of North America and Oceania. He also gave an address at St. Patrick's Seminary and visited his publishers at Ignatius Press.